

## Northern towns put out welcome mat for Ontario medical students

Jill Rafuse

Ontario communities that are short of physicians, nurses, dentists and other health care professionals are optimistic that many vacancies will be filled after October's "very successful" Health Professional Recruitment Tour, which brought about 1200 students and practitioners to five different tour sites.

More than 50 communities, most in Northern Ontario, sent representatives to speak with students and graduates of the province's five university health sciences centres. They hope to interest young professionals who have not yet launched careers in their hospitals, clinics and community organizations. Social service professionals were also invited this year and Dr. Claire-Lucie Brunet, the tour chairman, says this broader "job-fair" approach, which included extensive advertising at universities and in publications such as *CMAJ*, and personal invitations to family practice residents, paid off.

"In some cities, like Ottawa and Hamilton, the response was double that of previous years," said Brunet, senior consultant for Ontario's Underserved Area Program. Attendance was also up

in London and Kingston. Although Toronto experienced the only decline in attendance, organizers still sensed a "genuine interest" on the part of the more than 350 people who sought information there.

The committee is still compiling comprehensive attendance figures. Although it is too early to tell how many of those attending will respond to the call of the North, the overall response encouraged both the coordinating ministries — health, northern development and mines, and community and social services — and the underserved communities.

For recruiters like Daryl Cote, executive director of the Mary Berglund Community

Health Centre in Ignace, a small town about 200 km northwest of Thunder Bay, the tour is by far the most cost-effective way to fill vacancies.

"Ads in professional journals and major newspapers are very expensive and often bring little response," Cote said. "People who don't know anything about the area or the practice might not bother to check out a place like Ignace. The recruitment tour gives us a sort of captive audience and a chance to sell the practice, the medical opportunities, the challenges and the community."

Ignace has a population of 2400 and Cote said he fielded many questions about the extent of professional support for physi-

*Ontario Ministry of Health*



Representatives from Nipigon District Memorial Hospital discuss facility with medical student in Toronto

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cians, the health centre's relationship with referral hospitals, the ways a medical practice would develop, and the lifestyle of the small town.

For Cote, the tour paid off. He believes he has recruited a full-time dentist this year, and he got to know several second- and third-year medical students. He intends to keep in touch with them.

Irene Kryś, executive director of St. Mary's General Hospital in Timmins, feels her 181-bed facility also has "some very good prospects" because of this year's tour. "There was a very good turnout and a lot of interest expressed in our hospital. It's too early to tell if we'll be successful but we're very optimistic."

Timmins has had positive results in the past, but now it is particularly attractive because its hospital facilities are undergoing a major expansion. By 1993 the community will have an ultra-modern, 277-bed facility.

Although this was an important selling point, Kryś said Timmins also offers physicians a unique opportunity to develop community practices. "We don't have the number of layers that an urban medical setting has and this gives practitioners an opportunity to grow professionally. Our physicians say this is a plus."

Many people asked about the new hospital and the philosophy that directs the provision of care in Timmins, but recruiters also fielded many questions about the community environment, family lifestyles, educational facilities for children, and cultural opportunities. Kryś said recruiters know they must be prepared to address the needs of a spouse and family if they are to attract candidates.

Bernie Schmidt, chief executive officer of the 80-bed Sen-senbrenner Hospital in Kapuskasing, agreed that visitors to the tour sites wanted recruiters to sell them on the town, environment,

social perspective, recreational facilities, quality of life and transportation. His job was made tougher this year by rail cutbacks and the loss of two regional air carriers, but Kapuskasing still had an "exceptional" week.

Schmidt began the tour needing a GP-anesthetist, two GPs, a physiotherapist, two dentists and numerous nurses; the responses were unusually prompt this year and within a week he was negotiating seriously with candidates for all the positions.

"Over 100 people visited our booth in each of the five cities. And it wasn't only students — there were physicians who were already practising." He attributed the tour's success to the "superb" marketing this year, particularly in Ottawa and Kingston; recent turnouts there had been low.

The tours attract people from various fields, Brunet said. Some are students who went south to study but now want to return home to practise, and some are simply curious about northern health care. Others are interested in how they could develop professionally in a northern practice.

Health care professionals who work in these communities find their practices comprehensive, said Brunet, who used to practise in Timmins. Family physicians in particular have more chances to pursue all aspects of their medical training. While the tendency in southern Ontario is for FPs to refer patients after making a preliminary diagnosis, northern FPs undertake more of the initial procedures and tests.

"It means specialists don't have to be primary care physicians," Brunet explained. "They can actually be consultants." And because there are fewer specialists in the underserved areas, "they too use their whole training."

Still, retention of medical staff is the greatest problem facing northern health care providers. "We're trying to find people inter-

ested in a long-term commitment," said Brunet, "but we can't absolutely demand a permanent commitment from anyone. Careers do fluctuate."

The recruitment team also encourages those interested in only a few years of northern service — several physicians who went north to practise for a few years ended up staying for 20.

The province offers incentive programs to encourage health care professionals to move north. The Underserved Area Program will provide bursaries for eligible students in their last 2 years in medicine, dentistry, physiotherapy, speech pathology, occupational therapy, audiology and chiropractic. The bursaries are worth \$7500 and the student is committed to providing 1 year of service for each year the bursary is accepted.

There is also an incentive grant program to encourage practising professionals to head north. Dentists and physicians are eligible for a \$10 000 tax-free grant for up to 4 years, over and above fee-for-service billings; rehabilitation specialists are eligible for \$5000 grants for a 3-year period.

This year, for the first time, all visitors to the recruitment tour sites were registered and a follow-up survey to garner their views was to be completed by Christmas. Brunet hopes the feedback will help make future tours more efficient and responsive to the needs of both recruiters and job seekers.

The participating communities will also be busy with follow-up procedures, trying to turn interest into a commitment by arranging visits and interviews, writing letters, telephoning and sending information to prospective medical staff. Still, the tour is simply a forum for communities to sell themselves.

Ultimately, said Brunet, the initiative to serve in the North "has to come from the students." ■